

OLD GREENBELT  
Greenbelt  
Crescent Road and Southway  
Greenbelt  
Prince George's County  
Maryland

HABS MD-1217  
MD-1217

HABS  
MD-1217

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY  
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# HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

## OLD GREENBELT

HABS No. MD-1217

Location: The center of Old Greenbelt is the intersection of Crescent Road and Southway. The overall area is roughly bounded by Edmonston Road, the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center, the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, and Greenbelt Road, Greenbelt, Prince George's County, Maryland. Old Greenbelt is the original portion of the current city of Greenbelt, located approximately twelve miles northeast of Washington, D.C..

Time Period: Old Greenbelt is made up of two sections. The first section, planned and built by the Resettlement Administration during the New Deal, dates from the period 1935-1938. The second section, planned and built by the Federal Works Agency, dates from 1941-42.

Present Owner: The majority of structures within these sections are owned by Greenbelt Homes, Incorporated, a housing cooperative formed to purchase these buildings from the federal government in 1952. Many individual row houses and apartment buildings are owned by private interests. Several private interests also own shops within Roosevelt Center. The City of Greenbelt owns the Greenbelt Center School building, the Greenbelt Aquatic Center, and the Old Greenbelt Theater.

Present Use: Row houses, apartments, and detached houses serve as residences, with the exception of 10B Crescent Rd, now the restored Greenbelt Museum. Roosevelt Center still serves as a retail node for Old Greenbelt. The two main buildings include a restaurant, two convenience stores, a beauty shop, a realty office, a fitness center, a café, a deli, a dry cleaner, a design/build firm, a credit union, a post office, and a movie theater. Other buildings house the cooperative supermarket and pharmacy, an auto repair shop, a pizza parlor, and a barber. Greenbelt Center School now serves as a city-owned arts and social center, as well as housing some municipal functions. The Greenbelt Aquatic Center includes the original outdoor pool and bathhouse, with later additions and alterations. The Old Greenbelt Theater is still an active one-screen movie venue.

Significance: The community of Greenbelt, Maryland, was created through a landmark federal planning initiative in the 1930s and exhibits thoughtful integration of transportation, housing, retail, government services, green space, and pedestrian circulation. Since this origin at the hands of the federal Resettlement Administration, Greenbelt has continued an emphasis on planning and maintaining its physical and social character as a progressive community.

Franklin Roosevelt's victory in the 1932 presidential election initiated sweeping changes in the federal government to combat the economic depression of the 1930s. Among Roosevelt's advisors was Columbia University economics professor Rexford Tugwell, who had a particular interest in promoting economic recovery in the agricultural sector. Having been named assistant secretary of agriculture and then undersecretary of agriculture, Tugwell masterminded the formation of the Resettlement Administration, dedicated to moving families from substandard urban and rural locations to new, planned communities. The Resettlement Administration included the Suburban Resettlement Division, which was concerned with moving low- and moderate-income young families from cities to new suburban towns. Economics was a primary concern of this effort, anticipating that the low cost of outlying land would make new communities more affordable. This greenbelt town program utilized Garden City planning principles, first promoted in the United Kingdom by Ebenezer Howard and taken up by American planners, architects, and intellectuals including Henry Wright, Clarence Stein, and Lewis Mumford. Garden City ideals featured the prominent inclusion of parks and green space to augment the density of clustered, multi-family housing and emphasized planned integration of residential, commercial, recreational, and industrial uses throughout the city. Greenbelt, chartered by the state of Maryland in 1937, was the most prominent and complete town in the United States planned along these principles.

Construction of the original section of Greenbelt, Maryland from 1936 to 1938 provided work for thousands of unemployed laborers, as was characteristic of many New Deal programs. The town was an innovative combination of superblocks (neighborhood units with groups of row houses and apartments intersected by pedestrian walkways through communal green space), a central grouping of commercial and recreational structures, and segregated circulation patterns for pedestrian and automotive uses between the residential and commercial zones. In addition, the federal government promoted cooperative enterprises and associations in Greenbelt as a way to foster affordability and an enduring sense of community.

This original section of Greenbelt established a precedent in housing form and in planning that strongly influenced subsequent development. In anticipation of World War II, the federal government developed 1000 new units of row housing for defense workers in an adjacent section of the federally-owned land. These houses were developed into another neighborhood unit of superblocks with curving, picturesque streets grouped around a later elementary school. Old Greenbelt represents a successful example of a planned community, federal intervention into the housing market, and creation of an enduring community spirit through careful social planning.

Historian: LaDale Curtis Winling, Sally Kress Tompkins Fellow, Summer 2005

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## I. Introduction

Greenbelt, Maryland, is a Washington, DC-area suburban community with its origins in the “greenbelt town” program sponsored by the federal government during the New Deal. The Resettlement Administration (RA) directed Greenbelt’s planning, design, and construction as an experiment in moving low-income city-dwellers to a more healthful and more affordable setting. This planned community represented an application of Garden City planning principles still considered highly significant today. The Garden City ideal was first promoted in the United Kingdom by Ebenezer Howard. Howard, a British stenographer, published *To-morrow: A Peaceful Path to Real Reform* in 1898, reissued in 1902 as *Garden Cities of To-morrow*. Howard’s vision was for a decentralized, planned city with services and employment distributed throughout the urbanized area. This new urban area would feature an agricultural belt at the perimeter to pre-empt excessive growth or adjacent sprawl.<sup>1</sup> Several efforts were made in the 1920s to develop smaller scale garden communities within existing urban areas. Architects and planners Henry Wright and Clarence Stein worked together on two such efforts, Sunnyside Gardens in Queens, New York, and Radburn in Fairlawn, New Jersey. Stein became a consultant to the Resettlement Administration and helped guide the Suburban Resettlement Division’s planning efforts for the green towns, including Greenbelt.<sup>2</sup>

In preparing for the 1932 presidential campaign, Franklin Roosevelt assembled a group of advisors from academic backgrounds to help him plan a strategy for fighting the economic collapse of the Great Depression. Known as the Brains Trust, these advisors developed new economic and social ideas for responding to the national crisis. Among these advisors was Rexford Tugwell, a professor of economics at Columbia University.<sup>3</sup> Tugwell’s philosophy of economic development included increased efficiency and cooperative enterprise. He argued that in endeavors like farming, cooperative ownership of heavy machinery and cooperative marketing of produce offered multiple opportunities for improved efficiency and greater profits.<sup>4</sup>

After Roosevelt won the 1932 election, the President named Tugwell to a position in the Department of Agriculture. The reforms that the Roosevelt Administration, including Tugwell, implemented were collectively known as the New Deal. Among these initiatives were the National Industrial Recovery Act (1933) and the Agricultural Adjustment Act (1933). The resultant programs were attempts by the federal government to intervene in the normal processes of private business, in part financing affordable housing and addressing agricultural overproduction.

In his position in the Department of Agriculture, Tugwell began to address the difficulties farmers were having in the Dust Bowl, such as a protracted drought in Oklahoma and other Plains states. Tugwell concluded that the difficulties of destitute farmers as well as the urban

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Fishman. *Urban Utopias in the Twentieth Century: Ebenezer Howard, Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Clarence Stein. *Toward New Towns for America*. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1957): 120.

<sup>3</sup> Rexford Tugwell, *The Brains Trust* (New York: Viking Press, 1930), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Rexford Tugwell, ed. *American Economic Life and the Means of Its Improvement* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Co., 1930), 222-225.

poor, were often due location and environment, not their own failings.<sup>5</sup> He proposed a resettlement agency to develop new model communities and to move impoverished farmers and poor urban families into these new, federally-owned communities for a fresh start. Roosevelt formed the Resettlement Administration (RA) in 1935 with Executive Order 7027 and named Tugwell as its director.<sup>6</sup> The new RA comprised two divisions, Rural Resettlement and Suburban Resettlement. The greenbelt town program was within the Suburban Resettlement division headed by John Lansill. The division researched 100 cities across the country, studying their economic character and population changes; from these 100, twenty-five merited further in-depth study. From these twenty-five metropolitan areas eight were chosen for projects based on site inspections.<sup>7</sup> Of these eight potential projects – outside New York, NY; Washington, DC; Cincinnati, OH; St. Louis, MO; Milwaukee, WI; Dayton, OH; Chattanooga, TN; Chicago, IL - five were selected for development after a \$31,000,000 Resettlement Administration authorization by Roosevelt. The program was narrowed to three cases after St. Louis real estate and planning officials could not coordinate with the Resettlement Administration and a court injunction blocked the New York development.<sup>8</sup>

## II. Planning and Construction

Each greenbelt town – Greenbelt, Maryland near Washington, DC; Greenhills, Ohio near Cincinnati; Greendale, Wisconsin near Milwaukee – had its own set of planners, architects, and engineers who worked together to create a plan for that town. Working on the Greenbelt team were Wallace Richards, project coordinator; Hale Walker, planner; Reginald Wadsworth and Douglas Ellington, architects; and Harold Bursley, engineer, as well as associate planners and architects. Renowned planners and architects Clarence Stein and Henry Wright, designers of Sunnyside Gardens in New York and Radburn in New Jersey, and British Garden City planner Raymond Unwin all consulted with Resettlement Administration designers to promote their views of community design.<sup>9</sup>

A small segment of the Resettlement Administration staff was responsible for secretly accumulating tracts of farmland on which to build the new towns. The agents worked with local real estate agents to arrange options to purchase land from farmers. Urban land acquisition costs by the Public Works Administration (PWA) averaged nearly \$20,000 an acre, while RA average land costs ranged from \$100 to \$372 an acre, a significant savings.<sup>10</sup> Much of the land utilized for Greenbelt was already owned by the Resettlement Administration. When the agency was created, it took over the Subsistence Homesteads agency, a program created early in the Roosevelt administration to move the urban poor to farms to support themselves. The land in

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<sup>5</sup> Rexford and Grace Tugwell. Interview by Richard Doud. Santa Barbara California, 21 January 1965. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/oralhist/tugwel65.htm>. Accessed 14 July 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Arnold, *New Deal in the Suburbs: A History of the Greenbelt Town Program, 1935-1954* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1971), 28.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959), 307.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 308; Arnold, 56.

<sup>9</sup> Arnold, 47, 49.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 60-61.

Prince George's County, Maryland was owned by the homesteads program with the intent of creating a farm.<sup>11</sup>

Planning for Maryland Special Project No. 1, later Greenbelt, began in July 1935 and proceeded with haste throughout the fall and winter. The construction of Greenbelt was to be a work relief program for unemployed Washington, D.C. men. Washington's Works Progress Administration chief George Allen announced that the Greenbelt project would employ all needy District residents, pressuring the designers to complete their work so laborers could do theirs. Relief workers broke ground in Greenbelt even before the street plan was completed.<sup>12</sup>

These relief workers may very well have been the reason Greenbelt's design and construction was funded. When 1,500 men began their land clearing work in October 1935, it represented a political and public relations victory for the Resettlement Administration and the District of Columbia WPA. Public Works Administration director and Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes had opposed devoting money to suburban development because he felt it replicated the housing work that his agency was already doing. Ickes and Works Progress Administration head Harry Hopkins also lobbied against funding the RA work on the grounds that PWA projects could more immediately aid workers. Tugwell, in responding, promised Roosevelt, Ickes, and Hopkins that the greenbelt towns would be limited to demonstration projects. The President approved the RA funding, with a stipulation that the funded projects be completed by June 30, 1936 – 20 months from the approval.<sup>13</sup>

The town plan was completed in stages. First, a crescent-shaped street plan, crossed by courts, was readied in the fall of 1935. These roadways broke from the typical grid street arrangement to follow the local topography – the city was set atop a curved plateau. The streets crossing Ridge and Crescent, the main roads, were spaced far from each other, creating interior "superblocks," connected by pedestrian paths and green space. Each superblock contained roughly 120 housing units.<sup>14</sup> The curving, superblock arrangement offered a vast economy in utility and road construction costs, protected children from auto traffic, and formed neighborhoods within the community.<sup>15</sup> In order to provide as many jobs as possible, much of the labor was done by hand, eschewing heavy excavating machinery or cranes that could have promoted efficiency in time, effort, and money.<sup>16</sup> Nearly 13,000 plants, shrubs, and trees were transplanted during the excavation so that they could be reused for landscaping the finished community.

Site planning and architectural design continued as workers began excavating the land for roads. Building designs were completed over the winter of 1935-36. The associate architects, many of whom had worked in private firms before taking jobs with the RA, often worked night and day on the designs for Greenbelt because the opportunity to be innovators was so compelling to

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<sup>11</sup> Knepper, 22.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 22.

<sup>13</sup> Arnold, 42-43.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Lou Williamson, ed. *Greenbelt: History of a New Town* (Virginia Beach: Donning Co., 1997), 31.

<sup>15</sup> Clarence Stein, *Toward New Towns for America* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1957), 122, 139.

<sup>16</sup> Knepper, 26; Williamson, ed. 32-33.

them. The city would include 885 housing units provided by 574 row houses, 306 apartments, and 5 prefabricated detached single family houses.<sup>17</sup> The row houses were arranged within the superblocs to create courtyards, verdant community spaces that promoted interaction between neighbors. Building construction began in January 1936 and it was at that point that the town was officially named Greenbelt.<sup>18</sup>

RA architects and planners not only designed the buildings and landscaping, but also the interiors and furnishings of the row houses. These included picture molding on the walls to eliminate unsightly nail holes; clean, spare kitchens with modern appliances; and standardized furniture designed by relief workers. These workers were part of the Special Skills division of the RA, which put unemployed artists and artisans to work. The furniture was simple, modern, and functional, allowing it to be affordably purchased from the RA on an installment plan.

The Farm Security Administration started selecting residents for Greenbelt as building construction was nearing completion. Examining the population of the Washington metro area, the FSA developed quotas for residents based on distribution throughout the region. Religion, employment, age, and family size were all considerations for residence in Greenbelt. Families were also rated on their willingness to participate in community affairs and their interest in cooperation.<sup>19</sup> Using these criteria, the FSA selected 885 families for Greenbelt who infused the new town with a community spirit and sense of cooperation that, in combination with the built form of Greenbelt, established a foundational character for the city. African Americans were not allowed to live in Greenbelt, though they had served on its construction crews. New residents moved into their homes starting September 30, 1937 and paid rent established by the Resettlement Administration.

During construction of Greenbelt and early preparations for the other greenbelt towns, the Resettlement Administration encountered local and national opposition. Targeted for being wasteful and for pursuing cultural projects with relief money, Tugwell became a lightning rod for criticism.<sup>20</sup> After the District of Columbia District Court of Appeals halted the development of Greenbrook, New York in 1936, Tugwell decided to leave the RA. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 7530, reorganizing RA activities within the Farm Security Administration (FSA), a part of the Department of Agriculture, beginning January 1, 1937. The FSA continued the operations of the greenbelt town program until the agency was disbanded in 1942 and the towns transferred to the Federal Public Housing Authority and then the Public Housing Administration.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 20; Arnold, 50.

<sup>18</sup> Williamson, 25.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 34.

<sup>20</sup> Arnold, 31-32; Rexford and Grace Tugwell. Interview by Richard Doud. Santa Barbara California. 21 January 1965. <http://www.aaa.si.edu/oralhist/tugwel165.htm>. Accessed 14 July 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Knepper, 81-82.

### III. Site Plan and Buildings

The Resettlement Administration selected the site for Greenbelt in large part because it already controlled a significant amount of land in the area through the Subsistence Homesteads program. Old Greenbelt was located 13 miles from downtown Washington DC. At the time of its construction, Greenbelt was accessible only by a handful of regional roads, and was a mile from any public transportation.<sup>22</sup> In fact, much of the land was heavily forested before being developed and had not been traversable until cleared by relief workers. The Department of Agriculture controlled the adjacent Beltsville Agricultural Research Center, a major tract of land north of the Greenbelt site. The closest established communities were the towns of College Park, Berwyn Heights, and Beltsville several miles to the west along the Route 1 corridor.

The RA prepared 3000 acres of land for residential, commercial, recreational, and agricultural uses. The street layout, situated atop a curving plateau, was a reverse c-shaped plan conforming to the topography of the area. The two main roads, Ridge and Crescent, were separated by about 1000 feet and curved roughly north to south. Within the cradle of this crescent plan the RA planners focused the many community facilities that would promote interaction and cooperation amongst the city's residents. These included the Greenbelt Center (now Roosevelt Center) stores and movie theater arranged symmetrically on Centerway Plaza, the Greenbelt Center Elementary School (now the Greenbelt Community Center), the community pool, and other recreational facilities. Because the road plan essentially curved around this central community area, nearly all dwellings were within close proximity to the many community amenities.

Outside of this community crescent, planners distributed land for small-scale agricultural production in the form of allotment gardens and small farms. This seemingly peculiar portion of the land-use plan filled several needs for the RA. First, Tugwell based the transfer of land acquired for the agricultural Subsistence Homesteads program to the RA's suburban greenbelt new town effort on the reasoning that residents would engage in small-scale agricultural labor and production.<sup>23</sup> Second, the location of these farms and gardens, to the south and west of the town, were intended to create a permanent greenbelt around the city, secluding it from the encroachment of urban growth. Third, the production of fresh produce and other agricultural products for personal consumption or sale could help augment residents' modest standard of living.<sup>24</sup>

Greenbelt's residential buildings were distributed on either side of both Ridge and Crescent Roads. The houses were largely arranged within five superblocks defined by smaller roads crossing the Ridge-Crescent loop. Concrete pedestrian paths and "garden courts" within each superblock promoted neighborly interaction. The pedestrian paths also allowed residents to travel on foot anywhere in the RA section. In addition, four underpasses underneath Crescent Road kept pedestrian paths separate from automobile traffic.

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<sup>22</sup> Felix Bruner, "Tugwelltown: Uncle Sam - Landlord Super De Luxe," *Washington Times Herald*, 3 Aug 1936, X1.

<sup>23</sup> Resettlement Administration document reproduced in Williamson, inside cover. Williamson, 30, 32.

<sup>24</sup> Arnold, 91-92.

Greenbelt's residential types included attached single-family houses in rows or pairs, multi-family apartment buildings, and a few prefabricated detached single-family houses. The row houses and apartment buildings were a hybrid interpretation of streamlined Art Deco and International Style Modernism with characteristic minimalist detailing. These two architectural styles were influenced by a desire for simplicity in form and materials and arose during the 1920s in reaction against the popularity of ornate historic revival styles. Federal public works projects during the 1930s increasingly embraced a "government moderne" simplified form of streamlined Art Deco which had the advantage of both looking up-to-date and being less expensive to execute than most revival styles. While the concrete block buildings seem most modern with their flat roofs and industrial materials, all of the Greenbelt structures are largely unornamented except for a striped, "speed line" effect created by the horizontal bands of bricks between windows or at the upper corners of building facades. Original plans called for these lines and trim to be painted bright colors with the concrete block walls painted off-white.<sup>25</sup>

Each row house unit featured a "garden side" and a "service side" reflecting the thoughtful separation of communal green space and the necessities of automobile travel. The service side entries were designed with a small side cabinet for storage of a garbage can and landscaping tools. Groups of row houses typically were arranged in either parallel rows or a "U" formation. Houses in parallel rows faced a long interior courtyard, with garage courts grouped at the end of the rows so that parking did not interfere with the residential social space. Row houses arranged in a "U" formation could have either a garden courtyard or parking area at the center, with the corresponding garden or service side of the structures facing inward. Either way the garden side of the houses featured landscaping and small patios added by the residents.

Construction materials for Greenbelt's buildings included concrete, concrete block, brick, and/or wood. The RA varied the exterior form of the Greenbelt row houses depending on whether the structure was concrete block or wood frame. Painted concrete block row houses had flat concrete slab roofs and floors. Wood frame, brick veneer row houses had gable roofs covered with slate. Both types of row house had brick "speed lines" decorating the exterior walls and steel sash casement windows. The two row house forms were used interchangeably throughout Greenbelt and were available with ten different floor plans, ranging from a small two-bedroom unit of approximately 750 square feet to a moderate three bedroom unit of approximately 1600 square feet.<sup>26</sup> In both types of rows, two-story forms predominate. However, sixteen one-story units were scattered throughout Greenbelt, attached at the end of two-story rows. Storage space came at a premium in the row buildings, because neither type has a basement owing to a high local water table.<sup>27</sup> In the gable roof row houses, the attic offered a limited amount of storage space.

Old Greenbelt's twelve apartment buildings were sited in rows parallel to the street and served as a buffer between the commercial and municipal center of town and the row house courts at the

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<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Jo Lampl, "Greenbelt Maryland Historic District," National Historic Landmark Registration Form, 1996. (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Washington, D.C.), 8-9.

<sup>26</sup> Lampl, 8-9; Floor Plans. <http://www.greenbelthomes.net>. Accessed 8 July 2005.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

interior of the superblocks. Individual apartment buildings were indicated within the row by a step down in roof level or step back in wall surface following the topography of the gently sloping sites. Pedestrian paths traversed through the green space at the rear of the apartment buildings, linking the row house courts and commercial center. The three-story apartment buildings were constructed of painted concrete block with concrete slab floors and flat roofs. Like the concrete block row houses, the apartment buildings were modern in appearance and largely unadorned other than horizontal brick "speed lines" decorating the façade between windows. Previously industrial materials used to enhance this design included steel sash casement windows and three-story sections of glass block to illuminate stairwells. Each apartment building contained between 18 and 48 units and featured a grade-level entrance sheltered by a flat concrete overhang supported by round metal poles.

The RA also constructed five detached single family residences from prefabricated components. The principal materials were a masonry foundation and plywood core walls, with a bonded plywood exterior sheathing. All five units were single story with two bedrooms. Deviating from the steel casement windows in the other building types, the prefabricated units featured a variety of window types, including double hung windows with wood sashes and wood-frame casement windows in addition to the conventional steel casement windows.<sup>28</sup>

Public and commercial buildings were clustered at the center of the site plan. Greenbelt Center School was the city's first school, housing elementary grades for the children of the community's 885 young families. The school was designed by the original planning and design team, and opened in the fall of 1937. This three-story Art Deco brick building was built into a hillside. It was painted white, with fluted, inverted buttresses along its façade and glass block above doorways and illuminating stairwells. Five limestone friezes depicting the preamble to the U.S. Constitution by WPA sculptor Lenore Thomas were installed along the front under large, vertical windows. An additional limestone frieze illustrating "We the People" was placed above the east entrance. The windows were steel sash, consistent with other construction in the new town.

Greenbelt Center (now Roosevelt Center), the municipal and commercial hub of Greenbelt, included a pair of two-story buildings facing each other across a central plaza. The painted white brick buildings featured a minimalist streamlined design with bands of raised brick "speed lines." The chief distinction of the Greenbelt Center buildings was the rounded corner of each building at the south end of the plaza. These retail and commercial buildings also included large glazed windows for display of merchandise on their first floors, and ribbons of steel casements on the second floors, also wrapping around the buildings' front corners. A movie theater with a neon marquee (now reconstructed) was located in the east Greenbelt Center building, with the plain block of the theater space ornamented by inverted buttresses at the sides and rear. The central plaza offered social interaction, opportunity for repose on the benches and outdoor furniture, and a large limestone sculpture by Lenore Thomas entitled "Mother and Child." Also grouped around Greenbelt Center were small structures housing other community services such as a gas station and garage, fire station, and recreation center with an outdoor pool and bathhouse.

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<sup>28</sup> Lampl, 11.

#### IV. Expansion

In February 1941, Congress passed the Lanham Act in support of the European war effort, impacting many sectors of society. The Lanham Act included provisions for defense worker housing in an attempt to develop affordable housing for people who would perform industrial labor in weapons and machinery factories. Greenbelt received 1000 units of this housing, one of the largest of 43 such projects around the country. Residents were employees of either the war or navy departments.<sup>29</sup>

The defense homes, designed and built under the auspices of the Federal Works Agency during 1941, mimicked the RA homes of Old Greenbelt, but did not completely replicate the older forms. The defense housing was located to the north of the RA section. These row houses were wood framed, with asbestos shingle siding. They were arranged in a plan similar to that of the RA section, but lacked the detailing of the older section.<sup>30</sup> The new area was connected by pedestrian paths, but had no underpasses to keep auto traffic separate from pedestrians. The defense housing also lacked garages for the storage of automobiles, and so cars were necessarily more obtrusive in the service courts. Interior floor plans, however, were similar to the RA-era row houses.

#### V. Purchase

Since the construction of the original 885 units in Greenbelt, jurisdiction over the federally-owned city passed through several hands. The FSA continued administration of the green towns until 1942, when authority was transferred to the Public Housing Administration. By the conclusion of the Second World War, a movement had arisen within the government to divest its community properties. Part of the impetus was ongoing criticism of the cooperative nature of the green towns, which had been an important feature of Tugwell's plans for the communities. Several Greenbelt residents were investigated and the community at large was criticized as being communistic.<sup>31</sup>

A 1949 House bill mandating the sale of Greenbelt, Greenhills, and Greendale made its way through the legislative process, ushered by the bill's sponsor, Rep. Mike Monroney (D-OK). The rationale was that the time had come for the "government to get out of the real estate business."<sup>32</sup> At the time, government disposition rules required that property had to be sold to the highest bidder. Realizing that this would endanger the future of the green towns, Senator Paul Douglas (D-IL) successfully offered amended rules that would give higher priority to veterans groups and cooperatives that were interested in purchasing the communities.

Upon the enactment of the legislation, residents of Greenbelt began organizing themselves to be able to purchase the town. They first formed the Greenbelt Mutual Housing Association in 1946 with the advice of Lawrence Westbrook, a former RA employee under Tugwell. After the

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<sup>29</sup> Knepper, 62, 64.

<sup>30</sup> Knepper, 64.

<sup>31</sup> Knepper, 95-101

<sup>32</sup> Conkin, 323.

institution of pro-veteran preferences, the group reorganized itself as the Greenbelt Veterans Housing Corporation and began negotiations with the Public Housing Administration for purchase. The sale was financed by the savings of the individual members, with aid from the People's Development Company, part of the Farm Bureau Insurance Companies. Purchase included 1575 RA and FWA apartments, 60 RA apartments, all five detached prefabricated RA homes, and 709 acres of vacant land.

Upon completion of the sale in 1952, the unified direction of town planning and development changed. The Roosevelt Center buildings, the commercial structures flanking the central plaza, were sold to private real estate companies in 1954; most of the RA-era apartments were sold to private investors; and a portion of the RA- and World War II-era row houses were likewise sold to individuals. More than 1300 additional acres of vacant land was transferred to the National Park Service to establish a national park and make a permanent buffer between Washington development and the Greenbelt community.<sup>33</sup>

In addition, the hierarchy of authority over planning and governance changed. Under a 1927 Maryland law, the county holds planning authority over local jurisdictions. Instead of control through federal oversight or local government, Greenbelt residents had to begin working with Prince George's County authorities on planning the future of their community.

## VI. Alterations

After that transfer of planning authority, many changes came to the larger community of Greenbelt, though the form and character of Old Greenbelt has remained intact. The GVHC formed its own development corporation, Greenbelt Community Builders (GCB) to provide housing on some of its previously undeveloped land. GCB designed and constructed single family homes under cooperative ownership to address some of the unmet housing need for those who wanted detached housing in Greenbelt or had grown out of the apartments and row houses.<sup>34</sup> Historian Cathy Knepper writes:

They produced Woodland Homes, a 50-unit cooperative of two-, three-, four-, and five-bedroom houses; and Ridgewood Homes, 104 three-bedroom houses. Together these form the area now know as Woodland Hills, located on an extension of Northway, adjacent to the old defense homes.<sup>35</sup>

In fact, after a career in government and academia, Rexford Tugwell and his wife returned to the Washington area from Chicago and retired to a home in Woodland Hills when the subdivision opened in July 1957.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Knepper, 88.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 116.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* 116.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 117; Tugwell interview; "Announcement!" *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 20 July 1957, D9. [advertisement]

Much of the vacant land the GVHC had purchased from the federal government saw a change in ownership in 1955. In order to maintain financial stability, the cooperative sold its vacant land holdings to private developers. The land which had initially been seen as an opportunity for sensitive future development and at least as a buffer from encroaching private development was now open to subdivision and speculation.<sup>37</sup> As a result, most subsequent development in Greenbelt did not achieve the planned integration of the original sections. In fact, residents of many later developments were physically and politically isolated from residents in Old Greenbelt and their still active community organizations. Newer development took the form of large apartment complexes, office parks, and retail centers.

Within Old Greenbelt, periodic maintenance, renovation, and efforts to improve energy efficiency have been the chief source of alterations in the RA and FWA sections. After the completion of the purchase from the federal government, the housing cooperative – which changed its name to Greenbelt Homes, Inc. (GHI) – executed a round of renovations to make up for federal neglect during the purchase period.<sup>38</sup> In 1969 and 1970, GHI built twenty-five new row houses adjacent to Old Greenbelt.<sup>39</sup> Throughout the 1970s, GHI struggled to maintain and upgrade its buildings, raising fees to pay for new siding on the FWA row houses, electrical wiring throughout, and replacement of the slate roofs on the brick row houses. By 1978, GHI had developed “a formal rehabilitation plan, including installation of wall and attic insulation, window improvements, and weatherstripping. A second phase, scheduled for 1980, replaced worn plumbing fixtures and electrical systems, and added attic partitions in the frame houses.”<sup>40</sup> Replacement of slate roofing tiles on row houses maintained the historic feel of building exteriors.

All told, the renovation took five years and cost \$17.5 million, the last major renovation campaign. In addition, residents of individual units have been able to make alterations to their houses. The three most prominent changes have been replacement of casement with sliding windows, addition of rooms to increase livable space, and addition of exterior vinyl siding. Recently imposed regulations now offer some protection to the historic materials and facades of the buildings, establishing a review process and limiting the size of alterations to the homes. In 1987 the city of Greenbelt purchased a single RA-era row house and restored it to its late-1930s condition. This house at 10-B Crescent Road is now open to the public as the Greenbelt Museum.

Roosevelt Center, the commercial area in the center of town, has likewise undergone changes since it was sold by the federal government. Steel casement windows remain on the upper levels of the Roosevelt Center buildings, and the original color scheme adorns the masonry walls. Purchased by private developers, it has largely remained in private hands, with the exception of the Greenbelt Theater. The theater continued in private operation until lack of profits forced its closure in 1978. When the owner proposed splitting it into several small store spaces, a community group, the Greenbelt Cultural Arts Center, raised funds to lease the theater as an arts

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<sup>37</sup> Knepper, 117.

<sup>38</sup> Williamson, 191.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 195.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.* 224.

venue and proceeded with a thorough renovation and restoration, including plumbing, heating, lighting, painting, and seating improvements.<sup>41</sup> The theater was used by this group from 1980 to 1987. Since 1990 it has been operated again as a movie theater by P&G Theaters, with a reconstructed marquee installed in 2000. In 2002 the City of Greenbelt purchased the theater from P&G, while maintaining an operating agreement with the small theater chain.

While the nearly seventy-year-old town underwent regular restoration and renovation efforts, in recent decades residents have made an effort to preserve its historic fabric. In 1980 Old Greenbelt was listed on the National Register of Historic Places and in 1997, in the town's sixtieth year, Greenbelt Historic District was named a National Historic Landmark. In 1999 a large Indiana limestone sculpture featured on the central plaza of the Roosevelt Center, created by Lenore Thomas and depicting a mother holding her child, was restored to its 1930s condition.

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.* 222.

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